

Prosthetic memory: Re-creating the experience of trauma in Iñárritu's *11'09"01*

Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan

*English Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities,
Universitas Indonesia*

***Corresponding Author**

Email: gietty.tambunan@gmail.com

Abstract

9/11 will always be a traumatic experience not only for Americans but also for the rest of the world. This trauma has been re-articulated in a number of mass culture or popular culture products, such as novels or films. As argued by Landsberg (2004), mass culture could be used to attract the public in making sense of history, memory, politics and identity, including traumatic moments. In this article, the chosen case, a short film by Iñárritu's entitled 11'09"01 shows how a cultural product intended for the masses has the potentials to change the structure of memory construction. The film has been criticized to be focusing on the traumatic aspect and do not highlight the heroic discourse, which was the most celebrated notion of the 9/11 tragedy. As the most experimental entry, this article argues that the short film among the others in the same project represents an effort to empathize with the pain felt on that day by utilizing 'authentic' materials, such as segments of media broadcasts from all over the world and recordings of the victims' last phone calls to their loved ones. It also uses the images of people falling or jumping from the two towers leading into the ethical challenges for the cinematic documentation of a traumatic event, which will also be discussed in this article. The main method of analysis is textual analysis and Landsberg's conceptualization of Prosthetic Memory is used to interpret the data. The article concludes that the short film could be seen as a Transferential Space in transferring memories of 9/11 to the audience who might not have experience it directly.

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INTRODUCTION

The commodification of mass culture is often seen in negative terms for those who think that mass culture's main goal is to dominate, deceive or even brainwash the masses. These cultural products are also said to be revisionist because they tend to simplify complicated ideas and events. Many scholars have contested this notion by looking at mass culture as a potential and powerful tool to do the opposite. For these scholars, commodified images are the grounds on which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed. The potential emancipatory function of mass culture

could also be used in the matter of conveying memories. Mass culture could be used to find ways “to use the power to raise the level of public and popular discourse about history, memory, politics and identity” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 21). In this article, the chosen case study reflects how a cultural product intended for the masses, in this case a cinematic documentation of the 9/11 tragedy, has the power to change the structure of memory construction in accordance to Alison Landsberg’s Prosthetic Memory.

The case study is a short film by Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, a Mexican film maker. Iñárritu’s film is a part of the *11'09''01* project, in which eleven film makers, each from a different country, contributed one short film in response to the event of September 11. Each film maker is given 11 minutes, 9 seconds and one frame to tell their story. The project was initiated by a French film producer, Alain Brigand, in 2002. It has been criticized fiercely and some critics claim that it is anti-American. Instead of focusing on the traumatic aspect or even the heroic discourse, which was the popular discourse right after the event, the film deals with a much broader issue. Eleven short films convey how to make sense of the 9/11 tragedy in a critical perspective, for example Mira Nair’s piece that is about the prevailing discrimination in the aftermath of the incident.

Her short film, which was claimed to be inspired by real events, revolves around the narratives of a New York Pakistani mother whose son disappeared during 9/11; therefore, the people around her started to accuse his son as a terrorist simply because he is Muslim. The irony is that at the end, it is revealed that the son actually sacrificed himself during the tragedy making him a hero. Another piece from Youssef Chahine tells the story of how Osama bin Laden actually got his training the USA, meanwhile Ken Loach’s short film divulges the parallelism between 9/11 with another event occurring on the same date, which was how the Socialist government of Chile was overthrown during a coup orchestrated by the US government in 1973 (Kılıçbay, 2001, p. 111). This critical outlook of the event was condemned by critics of being anti-American. Besides the aforementioned criticism, critics have also argued that the short films overemphasize that Americans are not the only ones to suffer. Some short films are about parallel incidents happening in other parts of the world, as if wanting to show that the traumatic discourse of September 11 is also experienced elsewhere and probably in a different degree of trauma.

Previous research on Iñárritu’s film best described as eleven minutes of “visual silence” according to the director, has looked at how the basic and specific narrative tool, particularly sight and sound, are used to “traumatic momentum” (Clemente, 2011, p. 1) Clemente evaluates the film’s haunting features even though many critics say that by choosing such an artistic visualization, the director refuse to represent the awfulness of the 9/11 tragedy and took the easy way out. However, Clemente argues that by relying on, for example, the dark screen and minimum sounds, Iñárritu forces the audience to perceive the black screen as a part of the viewing experience. The abrupt sounds add up to the experience because as audience members are looking at the black screen they are suddenly invaded with the sounds. Clemente concludes that:

That is to say that even if one can consider that Iñárritu’s short film is a rather successful rendition of the return of the 9/11 trauma, it

remains a simple staging of this phenomenon and it will never be sufficient to enable the catharsis evoked by the director in his interview. (Clemente, 2011, 9)

However, in comparison with Clemente's argument, this article goes beyond measuring whether or not the film is successful in the rendition of 9/11 trauma.

This article proposes that Iñárritu's film, which was considered as the most experimental entry, appears to be the only one among the 11 short films in this project, *11'09"01: September 11* that is essentially and directly related to the tragedy. It also represents an effort to empathize with the pain felt on that day. Without any intention in diminishing the values of the other works, this article chooses Iñárritu's film because it is a rich text concerning the issues of memory and trauma. Iñárritu's documentary style by using 'authentic' materials such as segments of media broadcasts from all over the world, recordings of the victims' last phone calls to their loved ones or people screaming on the street during the incident is exceptional compared to the other short films. Moreover, he also uses the images of people falling or jumping from the two towers which is also a part of that 'authentic' sound and images. This will lead to the ethical challenges for the cinematic documentation of a traumatic event, which will also be discussed in this article.

METHOD

The method of analysis is textual analysis in which audio-visual elements of the short film is analysed in reference to the conceptual framework, Landsberg's Prosthetic Memory. Landsberg (2004) argues that the technologies of mass culture, such as television, films, mass media or the internet, have opened up new spaces for individuals from different backgrounds to share their collective memories. Through these mediums, they would be able to make sense of historical events that they did not experience directly building a new forms of public cultural memory or what Landsberg claims as "prosthetic memory" and increasing social and political accountability.

Meanwhile, the method of analysis was by looking at the mise-en-scene, the audio (the non-diegetic sounds used by the film maker) and the images that are infrequently shown emphasizing its significance in delivering the message of the short film. The audio and the images become substantial elements that were interpreted thoroughly utilizing film analysis tools, such as the ones offered by Bordwell and Thompsons (2012) and Turner (2003). As argued by Turner (2003): "Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself." (p.3). Film analysis should go beyond its structural elements and uncover the dominant ideology overpowering the narratives and meanings of the film.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The short film begins with a darkened screen. There is no image, just sound of voices speaking indistinctly, which turns out to be chants of prayer for the

death from the Chamulas Indians of Chiapas, Mexico. This absence of image will then be interrupted by cuts of images while we constantly hear other voices such as the newscasts of that day or people screaming on the streets. The flashes increase in duration and the content becomes evident: bodies falling or jumping from the twin towers. Silence suddenly cuts into the noise, along with a visual sequence. First, one tower falls then the next. Afterward, it goes back to the blank screen for a few seconds until it gradually turns into white. An Arabic sentence followed by an English translation appears on the screen: "Does God's light guide us or blind us?"

Its experimental feature is the most significant aspect of Iñárritu's work, making it a different kind of medium in transferring the memory of September 11. There are several elements of that experimental feature which signifies the text's potential in transferring the memory of September 11 to the mass, especially to those who did not experience the trauma directly. First of all, Iñárritu's strategy in limiting the visual elements of the film is out of the ordinary in the cinematic convention which mostly relies on the moving image. The interplay between sounds and images in Iñárritu's film might seem unconventional, but I would argue that it was one element that reflects the film's way in conveying the experience of trauma to the audience.

Alison Landsberg's conceptualization of Prosthetic Memory exemplifies what is being offered in Iñárritu's work. Landsberg proposes the concept of Prosthetic Memory as something which is not natural and a kind of memory which is not the product of lived experience. It is derived from engagement with a mediated representation like a film or visiting a museum. For Landsberg, memory is actually worn in the body as sensuous memories are produced by experiencing mass-mediated representation. Prosthetic Memory has the ability to produce empathy and social responsibility. "A sensuous engagement with the past, this book contends, is the foundation for more than individual subjectivity, it becomes the basis for mediated collective identification and the production of potentially counter hegemonic public spheres" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 21). It is purposeful not just for the sake of individual needs, but more importantly for the possibility of 'counter hegemonic' resistance or negotiation of the dominant discourse of memory. This sensuous engagement with the past could be achieved through the experience offered by the mass-mediated representation, such as through Iñárritu's work.

In her work, Landsberg gives several examples of mediums that project that experience and one of them is through films. The birth of the cinema made it increasingly possible to experience something inaccessible in a bodily way. Cinematic spectatorship becomes an experience due to its experiential nature, especially on the spectator's engagement with the image. Landsberg refers to the research done by Herbert Blumer under the Payne Studies in which a group of researchers, mostly university psychologists and sociologists, did a research on the capacity of motion pictures to affect individual bodies and subjectivities of the audience. "Blumer's study suggested that the experience of the film might be as formative and powerful as other life experiences. What people see might affect them so significantly that the images would actually become part of their own archive of experiences." (Landsberg, 2004, p. 30) It could even affect the person so much that he or

she can no longer distinguish cinematic memories from lived ones or the “prosthetic” and the “real.” This is in accordance to Jean Baudrillard’s notion of media and mediations, in which people’s actual relationship to ‘authentic experience’ has become so mediated that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the ‘real’ and ‘not real.’

By relying on the interplay between sound and images, the short film uses these cinematographic elements in such a way that it presents a certain kind of experience to the audience. Alison Young, who wrote an analysis of the Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, or 9/11 Report, and Iñárritu’s short film, describes her experience in watching the film as “a deeply disturbing viewing experience”:

“...I can well recall the sensations of physical stress that I felt while watching it. With the screen an enormous darkened rectangle, my eyes felt under huge strain, longing for something to look at, but each lighting flash of image produced a painful visual jolt. And the film’s alternating blackness of screen and shocking images of the moments just before death heightened the film’s sounds. To the extent that cinematic spectatorship involves an entire phenomenological raft of effects, for me, Iñárritu’s film is a sensorium of sonic and visual trauma.” (Young, 2007, p. 42)

Young’s goal is to raise questions about the legacy of traumatic events for the legal and cultural responses which follow afterward. Her experience while watching Iñárritu’s film discloses how the film, with its strategic use of sounds and images, transfers the experience of the trauma that causes what Young calls as “a sensorium of sonic and visual trauma.” The physical constraint is also a factor because the eyes’ responses to the blank screen and even to the sudden flashes of image add up to the disturbing experience in watching the film.

Even though the kind of experience offered by this film could be very subjective, which means every individual can have different kinds of experience, the choice to use this kind of sound and image effect gives a clue on how people will react toward this film. Landsberg gives an example on how the framing of the text, either a film or a museum, can lead to certain kind of experience even though it can be perceived differently by the viewer or visitors. Her example is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as an ‘experiential museum’ that has become a site of the production of feeling. “The museum is physically and emotionally exhausting and yet insists that one persevere in the face of discomfort” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 130).

In one part of the museum, the visitor must walk pass through a boxcar that had been used to transport Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka from 1942 to 1943. Inside it is dark, small and empty. However, the sensation of being in that boxcar is the thought of hundreds of bodies filling that car. The emptiness is in contrast with what it used to be like in the past. The relation between the feeling of emptiness and the imagination on how it used to be crammed with hundreds of bodies seems to reconcile the two connections of the past and present. After getting out of the car, we are faced with piles of objects, remains of the dead. Landsberg recalls these ‘mute

objects' as things that stimulate our mimetic faculty. This mimetic experience is not an experience of presence but the reflective feeling of absence. We experience the objects as the sensuous trace of absence. According to Landsberg, there is a simultaneous negotiation with the object and with a visitor's own archive of experiences: "...we experience the shoes as *their* shoes – which could very well be our shoes – we feel our own shoes on our feet" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 135).

The experience of being in the museum and watching a film are two different kinds of experience; however, we can compare the Holocaust museum with the corpus of this paper, Iñárritu's short film. If the empty dark boxcar at the museum gives a certain effect of traumatic experience to the visitors, the film's use of sounds and images, as explained by Alison Young through her personal experience, could also result in the same kind of experience. The physical burden of having to stare at the blank screen, the sheer tension on not knowing what images will appear, the sensation of listening to the sounds of news report describing the event and people screaming on the streets accumulate the disturbing sensation in watching the film. Moreover, the phone calls from the people on the plane to their loved ones has the same function as the piles of objects in the museum, what is left from the victims. By listening to these last phone calls, the audience can experience the same sensation as the visitors of the museum in 'putting themselves in the victim's shoes.'

By engaging into this mimetic experience, the museum as well as the short film makes empathy possible through what Landsberg identifies as the Transferential Space. Freud describes transference as "a piece of real experience, but one which has been made possible by especially favourable conditions and ... is of a provisional nature" (quoted in Landsberg, 2004, p. 135). The museum and short film become a Transferential Space because the visitors and the audience can experience events through which they did not live. Although the experience takes place, it is not the same or the exact repetition of the original event. However, the experience fosters an insight into the event which is probably inaccessible, especially on events happening in the past. While listening to the voices, the news broadcast, the people screaming or the phone calls, without any clear images, audience could construct the mental images by connecting it to the audience's own archive of experience. Audience then produces a memory that no one else ever had, and the act of taking on these Prosthetic Memories change his or her own subjectivities. This implies the personal characteristic of Prosthetic Memory inflected by the audience's other experience in the world, which is different from Collective Memory.

By conveying the Prosthetic Memory to the audience, the short film could have the same effect with the Holocaust museum for audience to understand the trauma of the event. Even though the short film only gives a moment of experience, it could be the grounds of understanding or even having empathy for something totally unimaginable. Landsberg argues that "For the event to become meaningful enough to retain as part of our future actions might be based – it must be significant on a cognitive level and palpable in an individual, affective way" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 138). In her work, Landsberg is positive in demonstrating the emancipatory function of mass cultural

technologies which are often considered as tools of deception or even brainwashing the masses. However, I would argue that her notion of Prosthetic Memory could be problematic especially in the corpus that I have chosen, Iñárritu's short film, in which the question of the ethics in using 'authentic' materials of traumatic events is still under debate.

One of the most significant elements of the film is the footage of people falling or jumping from the World Trade Centre. These images were considered unethical and disrespectful. The photograph of the 'Falling Man' is a part of this controversy and it represents the ethical challenge in documenting traumas. A documentary entitled *The Falling Man* (2006) reveals the story behind that photograph which was published on the 12th of September, a day after the tragedy. However, due to the negative reception, the photograph was withdrawn and has not been published in any kinds of media since then.



Figure 1: "The Falling Man" (a photograph taken by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew of a man falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 9:41:15 a.m. during the September 11 attacks in New York City).



Figure 2: "Eddie Adams' iconic Vietnam War photo"
(The photo depicted the execution of a Viet Cong soldier)

According to the documentary, the photograph represents the true horror of that day and the documentary was made to give a name and a voice to that

horror. The photograph becomes controversial because it depicts the last moments of a person's life, just like Eddie Adam's photograph of the Vietkong prisoner. Many readers think that the photograph is a private moment of an individual which should be respected and not to be used as a public consumption. Tim Junod, a reporter for *Esquire*, who tries to find the identity the falling man, explains that this particular part of the tragedy was cut out from the whole discourse of 9/11. The 'jumpers' seem to be brushed out. The New York's coroner's office did not even acknowledge that there were victims who actually jumped out of the buildings. These are the things people are not supposed to see or even talk about.

The fact that this particular part of the tragedy was brushed out puts into question the problem of ethics in documenting trauma. The photograph 'crystallized' memories and connects them with the present. "Perhaps we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past, in History, except in the form of myth. The Photograph, for the first time, puts an end to this resistance; henceforth, the past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we can touch" (Barthes, 1981, p. 4). Through photographs, we can make meanings out of the past. In the case of the 'Falling Man,' the photograph becomes a silent witness of what happens on that day. It captures, as mentioned above, the last moments of a victim of the tragedy. As argued by Clemente (2011):

In addition, as the 'jumpers' fell from the Twin Towers instead of remaining inside to face an equally certain death amidst flames and fumes, their very ordeal encapsulated the full horror of the attacks as it stressed the inevitability of the death of the people trapped inside the World Trade Center that morning. Since this inescapable fate probably lies at the heart of the 9/11 trauma, the figure of the 'jumpers' could legitimately be read as incarnating this trauma. (Clemente, 2011, p. 4)

The photograph is a defining image of the tragedy. For most people, it is a horrifying reminder of what happened.

When Iñárritu uses shoots of people falling from the Two Towers in his short film, it is a part of the text's tools in conveying the memory of the trauma. As explained previously, it is a part of the narrative that invites audience to enter into an experiential relationship with the event. The images of the falling man or the 'jumpers,' add up to the constellation of narratives used in the short film, such as news broadcasts from all over the world or phone calls from the passenger of the plane. A collection of 'authentic' materials is a strong point in Iñárritu's work. However, the question remaining is whether or not it is ethical to use these materials in documenting trauma. The same question was asked throughout the documentary of the 'Falling Man.' The private moment of death seems to be too sanctified to be used in any kind of media even though as Landsberg has proposed, it actually has a positive value in producing empathy and social responsibility. The debate is still on and even though Landsberg seem to give a more positive tone in this issue, I would argue that it is a contestable notion.

Prosthetic Memory is indeed a potential tool in challenging the idea that a particular set of memories belongs exclusively to a particular group or

individual. "With the aid of mass cultural technologies, it becomes possible for a person to acquire memories that are not his or her "natural" or biological inheritance and thus feel a sense of kinship with people who might otherwise seem very different" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 22). By 'burning in' the memory in others, who did not experience it directly, there can be a sense of empathy which will probably lead to a share of responsibility. Landberg's optimistic argument is in a way very utopian.

However, she also admits that not all Prosthetic Memory has a utopian result. Even though she did not explain what she means by this, I would argue that the ethical question is a part of this non-utopian result of Prosthetic Memory. Just like the case of the 'Falling Man' photograph, what Iñárritu might consider useful in conveying the traumatic event could be seen as unacceptable for others, especially for those who are closely related to the event. In the documentary, there have been many efforts in identifying the 'Falling Man' in Richard Drew's controversial photograph. The first effort was a mistake because it turns out that the man identified was not the person on the photograph. Even in this first attempt of identification, Peter Cheney, the reporter who was asked to identify the 'Falling Man', faced so many resistances especially from the family who refuse to acknowledge that it was their father. The reason was because of their religion which considers suicide as a sin and the fact that the family did not want to take into account that their father died in such a devastating way. Tim Junod, who did the final investigation in searching for the identity of the man, finally identified the man as a staff in the Windows of the World restaurant. However, even until the last moment, there was no confirmation from the family which reflects how this particular part of the 9/11 tragedy, the 'jumpers,' is a memory that needs to be kept in silence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Iñárritu's short film could be seen as a Transferential Space in transferring memories of 9/11 to the audience who might not have experience it directly. By creating this Prosthetic Memory in the audience, the film has the ability to produce empathy and even foster social responsibility. Moreover, the positive role of Prosthetic Memory could be used to contest the stigma that mass-cultural products are negative because they deceive the masses. However, it does not mean that every single media can have a perfect result in producing the same effect. The problem of ethics in using 'authentic' materials which in the case of Iñárritu's work is effective in conveying the traumatic experiences, still needs to be analysed further.

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